

The Commons

RESIDENT ALIEN



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The School of Arts and Sciences, University of Bridgeport

The turbulent sixties were my coming of age years. The Civil Rights Movement brought opportunities for the “worthy” black youth. I was deemed worthy and offered academic scholarships from a variety of colleges. I don’t know on what I based my decision, probably nothing logical, but I do know I made it alone. My parents never attended college. In any case, I chose Brandeis University.

I started college during a time of evolution and revolution—mine and the country’s. Raised the sheltered youngest child, I never had a chance to grow beyond what was acceptable in a small provincial town in the South of the 1950s and 60s. I felt there was more to me than what had been allowed to surface. Inside me was—what?

I could not wait to learn what was outside my known world. But, as ready as I thought I was, I was not prepared for what lay ahead.

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I ride the Greyhound bus from my home in southern Virginia to Massachusetts. From the bus station I take a taxi to Mars. The

terrain is like that of Earth. The inhabitants look like some I have seen in my hometown but whose customs are unknown to me. I see none of my own kind. The taxi stops in front of a structure which reads "Ridgewood 8." I cautiously approach the structure and, sensing no obvious threat, I enter.

I am viewed with interest as the residents gather around me. They stare at my hair. They surreptitiously feel my skin while pretending to shake my hand. It's all right. I am doing the same to them. They seem friendly enough, and apparently they form the same impression of me.

One female, slightly older than the others, reaches for one of my bags.

"Hi, I'm Rachel, the residence counselor. In the old days I would have been called a housemother. Let me show you to your room." As she leads me upstairs, she keeps up a constant stream of chatter trying to put one or the other of us at ease.

"I understand you were planning to attend Lincoln University and decided on here only last week. Well, we're glad you decided in our favor. Ordinarily you would have been assigned to Gold Hall, but it is at capacity. This house is usually reserved for juniors and seniors," Rachel continues. "You will be the only freshman living here. But don't worry, I'm here to help you get acclimated. Come back downstairs when you finish putting your things away. We'll be in the lounge."

When Rachel finally leaves me alone to unpack, I am seized not so much by panic as by shyness. Who are these people? How do I act around them? Mama said to just be myself, but I'm not sure I know who "myself" is. I came here, far away from anyone I know, to find out.

Unable to prolong my stay upstairs without appearing uncivil, I take a few steadying breaths and go downstairs. At the lounge door I fix my face with a noncommittal smile, take a deep breath,

and go in. The residents look up expectantly as I enter. Suddenly I feel like I'm in biology class—and I'm the frog.

Rebecca, a beautiful dark-haired girl dressed completely in black and smoking a cigarette, smiles at me.

"How sophisticated she looks," I think.

She leans forward, and when she speaks, her voice is low and husky. "So, Roxie, is it? Where are you from? I thought I heard a hint of a southern accent. Am I right?" Rebecca leans back in her seat after flinging her waist length straight hair from her face with red-tipped fingers.

"I'm from southern Virginia," I answer, even more conscious of my accent.

"Oh, that must be exciting. Have you been involved in any freedom marches or sit-ins? It must be terrible for your people down there." This comes from Leah of the bare feet, earnest eyes, and blond afro. I didn't know white people could get afros. I tense slightly, partly because I'm not in the mood to be the resident Civil Rights Movement spokesperson and partly because her afro looks better than mine.

In my best southern ice water voice I reply, "I can't speak for all my people, but my life's been okay."

Leah blushes.

I realize I am being unnecessarily sensitive. Leah is only asking questions about a culture of which she knows nothing. I must seem as alien to her as she seems to me. I try to soften my tone and add, "I've not been much involved in politics. I'm from a small town. We lead a pretty sheltered life there." I think Leah accepts my unspoken apology. We smile a pact.

You bet we led a sheltered life. At least I did. When Dr. King organized a march in our town, I was forbidden to participate.

Mama wouldn't even let me go downtown. At the time I thought she and Daddy were the biggest cowards alive.

"We're only trying to keep you out of harm's way," they responded when I questioned their decision. Looking back from the perspective of one who has become a mother and a grandmother, I can now understand their desire to keep me in their protective cocoon as long as possible. There would be time enough for me to join the revolution.

Conversation becomes more general. Nancy, who I gather is a psychology major, bemoans the fact that she will not be able to study with a certain professor. "I am so disappointed that Dr. Maslow is leaving. I was so looking forward to taking his senior seminar. He's the last word in humanism, you know."

Who the devil is Maslow, and what is humanism? I don't give these questions voice. There's no reason to show my ignorance yet.

By the time I refocus on the conversation, they are discussing their summer activities. "I ran into Josh while I was in Israel. His father was working there." Those words are spoken by pretty, petite Amy who turns to me to explain that she means Josh Mostel, son of Zero. "Josh is a student here. We hang out together sometimes."

At least I know who Zero is. But why is she bothering to explain her references to me? Am I supposed to be impressed?

"We didn't do anything special this summer. I worked for my dad but lived for my weekends at the Cape." I'm not sure of this speaker's name. She looks like she has spent her whole summer on a sailboat. She has the healthy outdoorsy look of a tanned Doublemint twin.

I try to follow the various meanderings of the conversation, but the strain of finding a familiar reference point gives me a headache. I excuse myself, explaining the bus ride has tired me out.

In my room, I again wonder if I have made a mistake in coming here. Maybe I should have gone to Howard or Bennett. I'd probably be nervous the first couple of weeks anyway, but I would recover more quickly at an all-black college. Maybe. College life is going to be strange enough without attending one in a strange land. Whatever made me think I was ready for college, especially this one?

The culture shock extends beyond getting to know my housemates. Getting ready for classes is not much better. Accustomed to being a star student in high school, I struggle to learn the language and ways of this new land. The traditions of this civilization elude me. How do things work around here? Are the denizens born knowing how to navigate the labyrinth of selecting classes, filling out forms, and finding buildings? Maybe I did not read all the paperwork that came with my acceptance letter. Somehow, through trial and error, I get through the beginning-of-the-school-year ritual.

And then the first day of classes arrive. I'm scared but excited. Finally there will be something familiar.

"Just close your eyes and listen to the silence. Let the rhythm of the nothingness suffuse your being. Free yourself." The sandals-shod professor stands at the front of the classroom with his eyes closed and his arms outstretched. I look around at the other students. They are falling for this hippie professor's line. Accustomed to more practical instruction, I feel uncomfortable and a little annoyed. What is the point? How can I take notes on this? I leave. Years later as I am reading the book, *Tuesdays with Morrie*, I realize that it was Morrie's class I walked out of. In the book I learn about the professor's passion for his subject. I learn about his love for his students. What I didn't know then was how to learn the lesson by listening beyond the facts. It was years before I learned to do that. At the time, I still needed concrete. So on to the next class I go.

Ah, Humanities 101. Now that is something I can handle. Read the book, memorize the plot and characters, and answer

straightforward questions. Problem: there are no straightforward questions or answers in Humanities 101.

It becomes a pattern with me when faced with the strange and uncomfortable: I run. Morrie's class is above my head; I run. My English instructor urges me to be more insightful in my essays; I don't return his phone call, and I don't attend the next class. All this running is a good thing when I'm offered a variety of mind-altering drugs at parties, not such a good thing when I don't understand what is going on in class.

I do grasp one tradition of this strange land. Early on I notice that professors do not check attendance. If the class is large enough, I won't be missed. That makes missing my 8:30 math class a guilt-free new tradition for me. I don't quite think this through until midterm exams. With no Academic Resource Center around, I must rely on friends to get me up to speed. Other students don't seem to be having any difficulties with getting acclimated. But how do I know what internal monologues they are having? They could be just as much at sea as I am.

The semester goes on. I observe. I listen. I begin to pick up the jargon, understand the expectations, and find my element. While I am still an alien, I am no longer overthinking my every move. Evolution is taking hold. Each time I return to my home planet for a visit, I have mutated a bit. I never completely lose what is native to me. I remain me, but the evolved me. I allow what is useful and beneficial from Brandeis to become part of me. I don't realize at the time that I am mutating. My mother notices the external differences. She remarks on my hair, my clothing, my granny glasses—the standard uniform of the black and proud college student. She never quite understands the internal changes. She just looks at me and mutters something about, “That girl's getting too sassy. Who does she think she is? Angela Davis?”

I don't notice some of the effects until years later. Yes, every experience, every person, every thing leaves its mark on me, however subtle. I even find myself listening to the silence.

While the evolution is taking hold, so is the revolution. Hundreds of miles away from parents or anyone who knows me, I am free to experiment with different personae. Finding myself is still on the agenda. Freed from the pressure to be the dutiful daughter/student, I revolt with full force. If there is a demonstration, I'm there. With the war in Vietnam a common cause for dissent among my classmates, I join with a group providing sanctuary for a conscientious objector. I add my name to a petition to the administration demanding Black Studies and briefly occupy the administration building. On a less political note, I have my first drink. I make friends outside my ethnic and cultural group. I'm not yet me, not the myself I'm going to become, but I'm doing the research and evaluating the findings. Amid all that revolution, I still find time to go to class. During the occupation of the administration building, I go to Humanities 101. I get a quizzical look from my classmates. My professor actually drops his jaw upon my entrance.

"Good morning, Miss Lea," he says a little more loudly than necessary. I'm surprised he knows my name, but I give him a weak smile back.

"Morning," I mumble in response. I am uncomfortable, but belligerent. To answer the unasked questions, I summon my courage and, sounding braver than I feel, I announce to all around me, "I came to Brandeis to get an education. That means coming to class."

Being a stranger in a strange land takes its toll on me. Sometimes, when I am tired or maybe even homesick, I unconsciously slip into the soft easy rhythm of my mother tongue. It is unintentional; it is unnoticed by me, that is, until someone remarks, never laughs, at how I pronounce genuine as "gen-u-wine." Genuine is my shibboleth. Somehow I manage to become bilingual.

Eventually the stress of maintaining dual citizenship gets the best of me. I don't graduate from Brandeis. I decide to continue my exploration elsewhere. I leave in my sophomore year. I experience

other places; I even go home again. I become a regular bicultural/bilingual expert.

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So what did I learn from my first foray into the unknown? Was it simply a waste of time and anxiety? Not really. I had credits to transfer for when I finally did return to school. I learned that there is much I don't know, and not just about academics. I developed a more open mind which forced me to develop critical thinking skills. Most importantly for me was that I stepped outside my comfort zone to experience the alien. I have done so ever since.

The Commons: UB Faculty Essays

The School of Arts and Sciences publishes faculty essays on topics that address a general audience in order to encourage the dissemination of ideas, to increase the dialogue between the disciplines, and to support the core curriculum. There is a four-member editorial board that will vote on acceptance and suggest editorial advice where necessary and/or helpful.

Once accepted, these essays will be published in two ways. A small run of 100 saddle-stitched copies designed by SASD Design Service will be printed. These can be used at the discretion of the professor, but should primarily be given to majors and other professors. The essays will also be published in PDF form and made available online.

These essays can and should be used for UB classes. Once enough essays are collected, a bound anthology may be assembled and printed. Again, this could be used for future UB core classes like Capstone or First Year Seminar, or an Honors course designed specifically around the material. These essays are published by the School of Arts and Sciences but submission will be open to all UB faculty.

Guidelines

1. The essay should be between 2000-5000 words, though exceptions can be made for slightly longer ones.
2. Essays should not have had prior appearance in print or in digital form. The author will retain the copyright for future publication.
3. Essays should engage a general readership. They should be influenced by scholarly training and experiences related to our disciplines, but not be scholarly writing. For example, an essay on “Henry Miller and Jean Francois Lyotard: The Aesthetics of ‘The Inhuman’ in *Tropic of Cancer*” would be inappropriate both because it is too narrow a topic, and because it would be too technical for a general audience. However, this is also not a blog entry. Instead, locate it somewhere between a personal essay and a semi-formal essay on a general topic of interest.
4. The citation method will be end notes (a style sheet is available), although it is certainly possible to write an essay without notes at all or with a list of sources for further reading.
5. Faculty should also provide a biographical paragraph and a photo.
6. A proposal or query letter is encouraged, with or without a draft of the essay. Certainly, if there is a completed essay you think is appropriate, send it to the editorial board. But before starting an essay, we encourage you to consult the board in the planning stages.
7. Send all materials to thecommons@bridgeport.edu.



The theme of alienation is widespread in fiction and nonfiction alike, probably because it is so universally felt. Professor Roxie Ray's wry and touching memoir *Resident Alien* recounts a brief period in the life of a young girl during her first year away at university, shining light on how interaction and difference create both individual personality and mass culture.

Although Roxie Ray has worked at the University of Bridgeport for over twenty years, she did not always aspire to work in academia. She flirted with the idea of becoming a concert pianist, but she had no talent. She considered social work, but she realized she could not bear the bureaucracy. After watching a performance of *Swan Lake* on *The Ed Sullivan Show* (ask your grandparents), she even considered ballet. What she did find is that she loved words—reading them, learning new ones, writing them. She parlayed this love of words into a love of writing, a love of learning, and a love of helping others learn to learn. Her son and her grandsons have reaped the benefits of her love of learning through dinner time word and trivia games to marathon Scrabble sessions. Directing the tutoring and learning center at University of Bridgeport and teaching the occasional literature class have been other outlets for that love.

